

“Giving from the Heart”

Matt. 6:19-21

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One of the most noticeable characteristics of this strange species of animal called human beings is our desire and proclivity to collect things. It's almost weird, isn't it, how much we like to collect things? Any things. Everything. Stamps, baseball cards, cream pitchers, cars, rubber bands, belly button lint. We are, by nature, collectors. Why else did God create flea markets?

In college I started collecting sports memorabilia called Starting Lineups. They were about six-inch-tall figurines of current athletes. Now, my wife Leigh called them my dolls, to which I took great offense. They are not dolls, they are action figures. And I became obsessed with my Starting Lineup collection. My friend Erik and I would scour the local toy stores looking for the latest batch of Starting Lineups. We knew the store workers by first name, and had the Starting Lineup shipping schedule memorized. When we found a new one for our collection you'd think we had just stumbled upon the Holy Grail in aisle 3 of Target. I can't imagine how much money we put into our collection.

And because my collection was so close to my heart, I wanted to show it off, to flaunt it a little. Specifically, I wanted to cover a wall in our house with my Starting Lineups. The problem was that Leigh, who's a pretty keen interior decorator, wasn't too thrilled with the idea. So after some intense negotiations, she gave me one room in the house to decorate: the half bathroom. OK, it wasn't quite the space over the mantel, but I made the most of it. So I covered the walls of that bathroom with these sports figures. It was wall-to-wall athletes. My uncle Mark said that when he used that bathroom, he felt like he was being watched.

My justification for the expense of this collection was that it was an investment. Each Starting Lineup I bought represented a down payment on something bigger down the road, because as they got older, the action figures would increase in value, until I could sell my collection one day and pay for Sydney's college or our second home in the Hamptons. With each Starting Lineup purchase, I was storing up treasures on earth.

Here's the problem: I wasn't the only one doing this. Erik and I weren't alone. Apparently a lot of other people were making the same investment, because the market became flooded with Starting Lineups, to the point that their value plummeted. I now have a few containers full of plastic toys that are probably worth only a fraction of what I paid for them, and we're praying Sydney gets a scholarship.

I should have listened to Jesus on this one when he said, “Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth.” This saying comes in the middle of his Sermon on the Mount, arguably Jesus' greatest set of teachings in all the gospels. He's telling the crowd that gathered to hear him what it means to live a life worthy of God. He teaches about things like fasting and prayer and following the commandments and not judging others. And in the midst of those teachings, we have these three verses: “Store up for yourself treasures in heaven.”

It may seem strange at first for Jesus to interrupt his teaching about spiritual things to toss in a disclaimer about financial things. Why would Jesus interrupt his sermon to remind his followers about their pledges? Because for Jesus, there was no

separation between the spiritual and the financial. He didn't draw two circles, one for the spiritual and one for everything else. He drew one big circle around everything and said, "It's all spiritual. It's all a matter of faith." Jesus is much more interested in our hearts than our wallets, but because he knows how our hearts work, he has to talk about our wallets.

It was a message his followers needed to hear, because they were just as susceptible to the seduction of materialism as we are. Jesus warns them about earthly treasures that could be destroyed by moth and rust. In ancient times, a person's wealth and status often consisted of fine and elaborate clothes. Clothing was seen as an investment. The word "rust" is better translated "eating away," and was probably a reference to way mice and other vermin could sneak in and eat food supplies of farmers. And of course, anything that was owned was a potential target of thieves.

So what's Jesus saying here? Is he saying we shouldn't buy anything? Is he saying we should live poor and penniless, not planning for our children's future or our retirement? I don't believe so. I do believe Jesus is saying be careful where you invest your money, but more importantly, he's saying be careful where you invest yourself.

Basically, what I hear him encouraging us to do is to step back and ask ourselves why we do what we do and why we make the choices we make. It's a question of priority. To what are we giving priority? It's one thing to buy a car; it's another to give it priority. It's one thing to collect action figures; it's another to obsess over them and decorate your bathroom with them. To what do we give priority? Jesus says if we give it priority with our pocketbook, then we give it priority in our hearts, as well.

Here at Community Christian Church, we are in the process of clarifying our priorities. For the first time that I know of, we are proposing to take one-tenth of all the money we bring in next year and send it back out through our outreach giving. That means we are proposing to almost double our outreaching giving next year from \$16, 500 to \$32,700. That money will go to support Denise Roberts and John Keller in their missionary work; it will mean an increase in our giving to Week of Compassion; it will mean new giving to Habitat for Humanity and to our Region, including funding for starting new churches. Through our increased outreach giving, we are putting our treasures where our hearts are: out into the world, doing the work of the gospel.

That doesn't mean we're not going to pay the light bill or not buy Sunday School supplies or not pay our ministers. But it does mean a recommitment, a recognition of the true fact that we are as blessed by what we give away as by what we receive. "Store up for yourself treasure in heaven." Jesus tells us that we have divine bank account, and each time we invest in the work of God's kingdom, we make a deposit, and one of the ways we do that is through the church, the local evidence of God's kingdom here on earth.

That's where I think the church often gets it wrong. The argument for giving usually boils down to something like this: We have this many members and this big a budget, so your fair share is this much. Wow, that's exciting, huh? How inspiring! I don't pay enough bills at home, so I think I'll pay the church's bills, too.

But when we give to the church, we're doing more than paying bills. We aren't just meeting a budget; we're giving to the ministry of Christ. We're investing in eternity. Pastor Michael Foss says, "Stewardship begins with the assumption that the gospel changes lives." When we support the work of the church, we are affirming our vision statement: To be a thriving congregation that changes lives through Christ.

We are committed to changing lives because it's a way of investing in heavenly treasures, not earthly ones. The truth about life here on earth is that there is no permanence in things: clothes fade, food spoils, cars rust, action figures lose their value, houses dilapidate, bodies break down. There's nothing we have here on earth that we take with us. You never see a funeral procession with a U-Haul trailer.

In fact, the only thing we can take out of this world and into the next is ourselves, our character, our integrity, our faith. The more faithfully we conduct ourselves here, the greater our treasures will be in heaven. That's how we store up treasures in heaven, by living out Jesus' commands here on earth, by following the example set by God. God's character is giving: "For God so loved the world he gave..." When we give, we live out the image of God in each of us.

Where is your heart? Are we giving priority to collecting things here on earth, or to storing up treasures in heaven? This is an opportunity to invest, that your heart may follow. We're not asking you to give your fair share of the budget. We're asking you to respond to God's love and grace in your life. We're asking you to live out the image of God inside of you, a giving God who has a heart to reach every person in this world through the work of the church.

As a church, we've made a commitment to serving God beyond these walls in an exciting way, bigger and bolder and more faithful than we've ever done before. Why? Because that's where we want our heart to be, out there, serving God by helping orphans in Kenya and by building houses for people and by starting new churches. That's where we want our heart to be. Will you join us?